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Chapter 8

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Minna Intke-Hernandez

Introduction

In Finland, education for migrants is mainly organised by the public sector and targeted to the employment market (see Pöyhönen and Tarnanen, this volume). The provision is often full time, and during the first three years each immigrant receives 10–12 months of language and civic education. However, amongst migrants there are also those who fall outside the employment market, such as the elderly, disabled and stay-at-home mothers (Hirsiaho and Vuori 2012).

This chapter draws upon an ethnographic study carried out in a Finnish language course for stay-at-home mothers. The course was part of the *Capable Parent* project which was implemented (2011–2013), in the Helsinki metropolitan area, as a sub-project of a national educational development project, *Participative Integration into Finland* (see Pöyhönen and Tarnanen this volume). This chapter will afford ethnographic insights into one particular aspect of adult migrant language education in Finland.

Taking an ethnographic approach

The aim of my study was to provide an account of: (1) the ways in which learning was taking place in the *Capable Parent* project; (2) the situated nature of the practices that were emerging; and (3) the participants' perspectives on their language learning processes and the integration process. The questions guiding my study were as follows. What practices are emerging in this project? How is the learning taking place? How do the mothers describe their learning experiences? What are their views, perceptions and feelings about what they are learning?

Ethnographic data were collected through participant observation and by conducting interviews and taking photographs during group activities. Photography has proved to be an innovative way to communicate when interviewer and interviewees do not have a substantial basis for

communication in a common language (Veintie and Holm 2010). With the help of the photographs interviewees can remember situations that they have participated in and they can also communicate using gestures and the words they have.

Although the participants were aware of my presence as a researcher all the time, I had several roles in the group right from the start: in some meetings I was accompanied by my two-year-old son and thus my role also became that of one of the mothers. Maybe it was my own motherhood that made it fairly easy for me to establish dialogue with the mothers. Most conversations started with us asking each other how the children were doing, admiring them or pondering together on some questions related to raising children or to the child's present age. In addition to the roles of researcher and mother, my role was that of a fellow traveller. During interviews and conversations, I heard many things about the past of the mothers and their present concerns. They kept returning to these topics and we considered them together. In most cases, they did not ask for my advice but I was an equal partner and listener – as one of the mothers.

Inevitably, we examine everything we observe through our own historical and social experiences. I am a teacher, and as I began this fieldwork, I found it difficult to let go of my teacher identity and the fairly traditional and normative ideas about language learning that I held at the outset. It was difficult to step into the ethnographic position that required examining something old and familiar with new eyes. Initially, I felt critical of the fact that mothers were not offered a printout of the course plan, and that progress was not made according to any pre-planned agenda. It was hard for me to accept this way of working. It was hard to believe that anyone could learn like this. However, over time, I came to realise that learning was in the hands of the mothers themselves.

Although I am the author of this chapter and these are my views reflected in this research narrative, the process of building knowledge about the *Capable Parent* project was a collaborative one. It involved extended engagement and dialogue with the participants in the research, particularly the mothers of migrant origin. So, wherever possible, their voices are brought into the account I provide in the chapter

The Capable Parent *project*

The main objective of the *Capable Parent* project was to develop a new form of support for the learning of migrant parents who take care of children at home, and who therefore cannot participate in regular integration training courses. The activities of the project supported participants in their role as parents and provided them with opportunities to learn Finnish, as well as cultural and civic skills. An additional objective

was to develop support group activities for Finnish language learning, and to identify effective forms of outreach for stay-at-home mothers. One of the concrete activities was a course in the Finnish language and culture for mothers that was organised with their children. Unlike the conventional training, the participants were not divided into different groups according to their language proficiency or basic education, and they had not taken a language test designed to assess their starting level. However, the most noticeable difference compared to any conventional education was that in this group mothers and children were together all the time, and activities were planned and carried out in a child-oriented manner. This orientation was reflected in the content of the activities: there were arts and crafts activities, songs were sung and games were played. There was no clear-cut advance plan for the meetings – that might not have been possible anyway with such small children (aged between a few months and six years). The group got together weekly on the same day and at the same time for two hours.

Typically, integration training is organised by institutions specialised in adult education. However, this course was organised in a residents' park. The park is a public open access meeting place for children of all ages and their parents and carers. This Mother and Child group convened indoors at the residents' park. Most activities took place in the living room where there is abundant space and where there are toys for the children. In addition to the mothers and children, three instructors participated in the group and the project: they were present as 'hostesses' who opened and locked the doors, made coffee, helped with child care, talked with the mothers, informed them about what was going to happen in the meeting and got the materials ready. Also, they always made sure that nobody was left alone: new mothers were introduced to each other and guided to participate in discussions and activities.

The group consisted of about ten mothers originating form Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Some of them had lived in Finland for just over a year, others several years. A striking demonstration of the strong significance of motherhood for one's identity was the presence of one lady in the group, Madina, whose own children and grandchildren lived outside Finland. In the past, she had tried other courses offered to her, but she found her niche in this group. Even though she participated on her own, her children and grandchildren were present through her stories. She herself acknowledged that the group filled the void left by having her family so distant.

The group was initially founded with migrant mothers in mind, but the park's local mothers (who spoke Finnish as a first language) wanted to join in the activities as well. Their presence actually contributed to integration since it offered an opportunity for migrant mothers to have contact with them. The group's activities were the same as those of the

other visitors to the park: baking, handicrafts, small excursions into the immediate surroundings, coffee drinking and chatting. These activities constituted a form of social support, empowerment and an opportunity for mothers of young children to take part in activities within their own area. The activities also had a wider social significance and wider implications: they contributed to the improvement of relationships between people of different cultural backgrounds, to local relations of equality and to social wellbeing. Over a two-year period, the mothers involved in the project discussed issues that mothers typically discuss: children, their upbringing, relationships, the joys and sorrows of everyday life and how to cope with it all.

One session on a cloudy day

The meetings started the same way each time with a group song, making note of the date written in Finnish, and engaging in general exchange of news and the weather. Below, I include a brief vignette based on my observations and field notes. The vignette depicts the starting point for project activities on one particular day. The names used here are all pseudonyms, so as to preserve confidentiality.

> The meeting hasn't yet officially started but Jelena and Aisha are already seated on the sofa discussing a children's second hand shop that has opened nearby. Jelena's daughter is playing by her mother's feet whilst Aisha is breastfeeding her baby.
>
> Laura, the instructor, comes in and begins by inviting everybody to the centre to form a circle. They all, children and mothers, gather together in a circle and take each other by the hand. They then acknowledge everybody's presence by mentioning him or her in a song. The children clearly like this; they dance along. One of the mothers sways along to the rhythm of the song, and there is a smile on the face of each mother as her name is referred to in the song. After the song the mothers sit down on the sofa, chairs or the floor. Laura has attached a date on the cupboard door. She asks the mothers, in Finnish, what the date is. Miriam and Aisha listen attentively. Together they begin to search for the correct words and forms in Finnish. Sawan has moved to the sofa, her son is still asleep in the pram on the porch.
>
> Laura asks what the weather is like today, and points to the cupboard door with weather cards attached to it. Aisha and Miriam observe carefully and respond negatively to Laura's question 'Is it sunny today?', 'Is it warm?' and so on. 'Is it cloudy today?' also gets a negative response although it is particularly cloudy day. Aisha asks for the correct spelling of the word 'cloudy', Laura moves to the sofa to give guidance.

> Pondering over spelling is interrupted as one of the children has fallen over and starts to cry, and this in turn has made two other children upset and they join in. The bawling is loud but the mothers carry on smiling and calm the children down. As the sobbing wanes Laura explains the plans for the day. The plan is to go to the nearby woods for a walk and get familiar with the environment.
>
> (Notes, 26 September 2012)

The pace of the meetings was dictated by the children and their mothers: everything was halted if circumstances so required. Sometimes the children played together for most of the meeting, while some sat on their mother's lap. On some occasions, calming an upset child took up of the meeting. However, most children had adopted the place as their own; they were cautious and shy when the group first started, but were later playing happily with the mothers, instructors and each other.

Learning together and from each other

Being a mother and part of a family was the main basis of membership of this group. Normally, when people join a Finnish course of any other kind, be it a preparation for work or another course, they join as an individual, and their family and life situation are not necessarily brought up unless they choose to do so. An adult may be in the middle of challenging family events, but this is not usually taken into consideration. Teachers and institutions organising courses require attendance and attention to studies regardless of people's circumstances. Instead of supporting the family as a whole, the emphasis is on only one of its members. In contrast, the group participating in my research took into account the family situation, respected it and aimed to support the relationship between mother and child.

The women I interviewed regarded motherhood as the centre of life. They seemed to think through their children and always talked with the child in their mind: they attached meanings to their experiences and events by looking at them from their children's point of view. They appreciated most the group activities, such as the circle in the beginning and at the end of the session, because their children seemed to like them best. Motherhood clearly had a central role in the life of these women. They said that they wanted to learn the language so that they could take their children to see a doctor and independently manage their family's affairs in society. Language is learned for life, not for the sake of language itself. As Lainiala and Säävälä (2010) note, migrant women feel that it is difficult to be a good mother without knowing the local language, because motherhood means looking after the child's welfare, providing non-material security and taking care of the child's affairs with regard to

institutions such as the school and the kindergarten. These authors also point out that motherhood creates the need to learn the language, but at the same time its obligations curtail opportunities for language learning. Some of the women had the sole responsibility for childcare in their new home country, because migration had made collective sharing of responsibility impossible as relatives and their safety network had been left behind as they departed from their country of origin (cf. Hrdy 1999). In cases such as these, it might be nearly impossible to participate in a mainstream language course. For some, it was difficult to arrange for childcare, and some felt that they had such a strong bond with their babies that they did not want to be separated from them. Many mothers emphasised that their children also learned in the group, as did the mother in the following interview who regarded learning together with her child as both meaningful and unselfish:

Minna: Which way do you prefer? I mean do you prefer learning like here, with children and by doing things, or do you prefer traditional school learning?

Mother: It's different. Because if you have a little child, one year or two or three years, that is not the time for you to learn. That is not just time for you. You must learn with the baby, to be together in that. Because if you go to school alone, without your baby, that is good for you but not for the child. If the child just stays at home, it's not good for him and that is selfish. You must go to school with your child and learn with your child, you know. My child knows all we have learned here. He can say 'one, two, three' [in Finnish], he can sing all these songs, he can say 'nose, eyes, mouth' in Finnish. And he needs to play with other children, and he plays, he sings, and we learn everything together. That is good for him and good for me.

(Interview, 28 March 2013)

In the Mother and Child group, the teaching and learning was egalitarian in nature and the intention was not to transfer 'information' directly from teachers to students, but learning took place through shared activities instead. This is a clear example of practices where the language planning and policy starts from the bottom up (Hornberger and Johnson 2011). Moreover, it could be argued that there was some evidence of pedagogy of a Freirean nature at work in this *Capable Parent* project. In Freirean pedagogy, teaching and learning is interactive and derives from the students' needs. It does not merely involve reproducing teacher's words and concepts. Learning is achieved through dialogue which is, in turn, based on trust and on consideration of the students' experiences. A Freirean approach aims to be transformative in nature and to build

learners' capacity to actively participate in society. It also aims at enabling students to see connections between their individual life circumstances and the social context in which they are embedded. Underpinning this aim is the belief that individuals are active subjects who are able to change their environment and to affect the society they live in (Freire 1970; Freire and Shor 1987).

The key factor uniting the instructors and the migrant mothers in the *Capable Parent* project was motherhood. They discussed motherhood, children, family and the construction of different femininities as equal players, not as teachers and students. It was not immediately obvious who had ownership of teaching or learning, or the right or duty to decide on the nature of the learning process (Freire and Shor 1987; Hirsiaho et al. 2007). The following vignette highlights this aspect of the practices emerging in the project:

> The table has once again been set. Jelena has bought Turkish coffee and Khadija has baked two different types of bread at home. The conversation during the apple pie baking session last week had turned to making bread. They had discussed which ingredients are used for bread in Finland and each other's countries. They had realised that just ordinary everyday bread can be made in many different ways. Inspired by this conversation Khadija has baked two different types of bread earlier in the morning and has brought them for the other participants to taste. They try the breads and ask how they were made. One method sounds laborious – you need to add butter repeatedly and roll the dough over and over again. Khadija explains this, partly by miming, and the others help her by providing her with Finnish words. She can't recall the name for one of the spices, and they can't guess. She fetches her phone from the bag, calls her husband and returns smiling: 'Cumin', she says.
>
> (Notes, 27 February 2013)

The notion of 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al. 1992) helps us to explain this episode. In developing this concept, Luis Moll and his colleagues were highlighting historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for individual and household well-being. They were arguing that these bodies of knowledge and skills have a crucial part to play in places of formal and non-formal learning, and can play a role in student empowerment. This episode highlights the way the traditional roles of teacher and student can give way to real dialogue when students are given a forum for sharing the knowledge that they already have. Khadija was teaching those present that day how traditional bread is made in her place of origin. She was describing and demonstrating the bread making technique in fine detail, and the rest of

them participated by providing the missing words in Finnish. Even her husband participated indirectly in this learning event by translating Khadija's word from their home language into Finnish over the phone. Which one of them, then, was the student, and who was the teacher on this occasion? Or does it really matter?

Conclusion

The activities in the *Capable Parent* project have shown that things can and should be done differently. A more traditional and conventional educational and integration path does not necessarily suit everyone. Migrants are often offered language courses as the first, best and even the only solution for integration. They are promised and led to believe that once they master the language, employment and a full membership in the society will follow. What if we first encouraged them and gave support in other areas of life? How many parents with small children have resources to start learning grammar and vocabulary that do not necessarily relate to their current needs?

Freirean goals and activities were not explicitly adopted in the course. Initially, the group's activities were similar to those of a traditional language course: during the first session mothers were given copies of Finnish language exercises, and occasionally they read short sections from Finnish study books. Soon, however, the instructors started to draw on the learners' 'funds of knowledge' and abandoned traditional, school-like teaching methods. As a consequence, Freirean-type pedagogy became the most common pattern in the weekly activities of the group.

The mothers with their children dictated the pace of the meetings and even the subject areas that were discussed. They did this by coming along and just being present. They took over the space. The instructors offered, of course, activities for the day but often the situation changed according to the needs of the mothers and children. Learning was intertwined with life in the surrounding residential area and society. Learning cannot be controlled, it is unpredictable, ever growing, inspiring and contagious. I conclude my article with the words that one of the mothers used to summarise her learning experience with the group:

> This is not just learning Finnish. No, I don't feel like that. This is not just learning. This is being with people. Meeting other people. Talking with other people. Developing friendship with other people. For my daughter to grow up with other people, I don't only stay at home, I come here to learn with my baby and I feel energy in myself. I want to include myself in this. I am a very happy woman. I talk with people, and that makes me feel like a woman with power.

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